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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of reflection journals in a teacher education course with a field experience, analyzing and discussing the results of using these reflective journals. Information comes from Education 75 (ED 75), "The Teacher, the Learner, and the Curriculum," which is offered at a small, Texas, liberal arts institution. The third in a sequence of three required undergraduate education courses, ED 75 includes a 9-week teaching experience in a public school for at least 1 hour per day. In addition to a limited amount of direct instruction, professors model a number of interactive instructional methods. Writing assignments include the weekly reflection journal entries in which students respond to prompts (e.g., Describe your initial impressions of the classroom, What challenges and opportunities do you see for yourself as a teacher?, and What strategies are effective for all learners?). Requiring students to respond to prompts rather than submit unstructured weekly journals had an observable positive impact on the depth and quality of students' reflections, encouraging them to reflect on specific issues they may not have addressed on their own. (Contains 20 references.) (SM)

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Helping Preservice Teachers Focus on Success for All Learners Through Guided Reflection

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Helping Preservice Teachers Focus on Success for All Learners Through Guided Reflection

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OBJECTIVES AND CONTEXT

The objectives of this paper are to describe the use of reflection journals in a teacher education course with a field experience, and to analyze and discuss the results of using these reflective journals. The authors are co-instructors of Education 75, "The Teacher, the Learner, and the Curriculum," at Austin College, a small liberal arts institution.

For more than three decades, Austin College has offered a five-year teacher education program, the Austin Teacher Program (ATP), that leads to a Master of Arts in Teaching degree and elementary or secondary certification. Austin College does not offer teacher certification or degrees in education at the bachelor's level, although ATP students begin their education course work and field experiences during their undergraduate program.

At the end of ED 75, students apply to the Austin Teacher Graduate Program. The graduate program consists of nine graduate course credits (thirty-six semester hours), including a three-course credit (twelve semester hour) teaching practicum. Many of the graduate courses include a field experience. Secondary students take two graduate content electives as part of their M. A. T. Most ATP students complete the practicum as paid interns with their own classrooms, while some serve as graduate student teachers. Interns have a mentor teacher in their grade level or subject area. Interns and graduate student teachers attend a weekly seminar with their supervising professor, who also observes the students several times during the semester.

The third in a sequence of three required undergraduate education courses, ED 75 includes a nine-week teaching experience in a public school for at least one hour or class period per day. One ED 75 instructor observes the elementary students twice while the other observes the secondary students twice. Assigned readings and on-campus class meetings deal with a variety of topics that include the required Texas curriculum, planning and assessing instruction, choosing appropriate instructional methods, characteristics of learners, differentiating instruction, models of classroom management and discipline, and an introduction to the educational implications of the latest research on the brain. The current textbooks for ED 75 are *Effective Teaching Methods* (Borich, 2000) and *The Synergetic Classroom: Joyful Teaching and Gentle Discipline* (Charles, 2000).

In addition to a limited amount of direct instruction, the ED 75 instructors model a number of interactive instructional methods, such as KWL charts, jigsaw activities, small group activities, large group discussions, simulations, small group presentations on classroom management, "gallery tours," viewing and discussing professional development videos, etc. Writing assignments include responses to assigned readings, weekly lesson plans following a prescribed format, a personal philosophy of education, a self-assessment, and weekly reflection journal entries. At the end of the course, all ED 75 students present a portfolio that communicates their growth in five teaching proficiencies: learner-centered knowledge, learner-centered instruction, equity in excellence for all learners, learner-centered communication, and learner-centered professional development (Texas Education Agency, 1994).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Reflection is a central pedagogical component of the Austin Teacher program. Throughout the ATP, students are asked to reflect on their experiences in a variety of ways. Reflection can be the catalyst that enables students to synthesize new understandings from the collision of theory and real-life events in classrooms. We believe that teacher education students need not only a grounding in theory and research, but also a series of teaching

experiences that confront them with the complexity of a classroom, requiring them to define problems, construct meanings, and test theories. Beginning teachers do not learn all they need to know about teaching simply from experience, as some critics of teacher education imply. Nor can they learn to be effective teachers merely by studying the professional literature. While self-knowledge is essential for growth as a teacher, isolated introspection is not sufficient in itself. We believe novice teachers learn most powerfully by reflecting continuously on their *informed* experiences, and by engaging in dialogue about their reflections in a safe environment. This belief is the justification for requiring ED 75 students to submit a reflection journal via e-mail for each of their nine weeks in the classroom.

The ED 75 instructor who is assigned to observe the student reads and responds to his or her journals within twenty-four hours of the submission deadline. We concur with Cheng and So (2002) that preservice teachers' professional growth is enhanced by more and better communication with their college supervisors. Our quick response to their weekly reflections allows us to encourage our students and to affirm their efforts while offering opportunities to suggest alternative views, concepts or approaches – in short, to help students begin integrating theory and practice.

Schon (1985) refers to reflection-in-action as the responses that skillful practitioners bring to their practice. This reflection consists of strategies of action, understanding phenomena, and ways of framing the situations encountered in day-to-day experience. This reflection-in-action may take the form of problem solving, theory building, or re-appreciation of the situation. Schon (1987) contends that "the problems of real-world practice do not present themselves to practitioners as well-formed structures." Certainly this is true for ED 75 students as they begin to plan instruction, teach, manage, and assess learning in a real classroom with all of its diversity and unpredictability. They are not simply *in* a classroom as they were in earlier field experiences; they are now *part of* the classroom. As Dewey (1963) said in his seminal 1938 Kappa Delta Pi lecture, "An

experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at that time, constitutes his environment." In their weekly journals, ED 75 students reflect on those "transactions."

Ecclestone (1996) acknowledges that the terms "reflective practice" and "reflection" are in vogue in teacher education programs on both sides of the Atlantic. However, she laments the lack of debate about the purpose of reflection, the absence of consensus in defining it, and scant efforts to assess its effectiveness. She echoes others' contention that proponents of reflection often fail to recognize that it may be based on different epistemological stances -- Dewey's rational, retrospective approach or Schon's intuitive, action-oriented concept.

While Ecclestone (1996) raises important questions, it is not the purpose of this paper to defend the use of reflection in teacher education, a model which Norton (1997) concedes is still evolving. With Glatthorn (1996), we believe that reflecting on one's growth stimulates professional development. Arrendondo *et al.* (1995) found that teachers who reflect on their practice are better able to make their actions consistent with their professed beliefs. Hatton & Smith (1995) discovered that the process of writing stimulates teacher education students to refine their thinking about pedagogical issues and about their own development as teachers. In interviews, many preservice teachers credited weekly dialogue journals "as major catalysts in promoting and refining strategies of reflective thought" (Norton, 1997, p. 408). Raines & Shadiow (1995, p. 272) put it well when they wrote, "[R]eflection [in teaching] is not a point of view, but rather a process of deliberative examination of the interrelationship of ends, means, and contexts."

In previous years, ED 75 instructors had simply asked students to submit a weekly journal reflecting on salient events in the previous week's teaching experience. There was variation both in students' approaches to the task and in the quality and quantity of their reflections. Although some students' journals were insightful, other students wrote lengthy yet superficial "blow-by-blow" accounts of classroom life. Still others were terse, never

delving below the surface. We discovered, as did Edens (2000), that inviting relatively unstructured reflections from teacher education students tends to elicit a preponderance of negative comments about student misbehavior and the supervising teacher's perceived deficiencies. Anderson (1997), Burant (1998), and others have also noted that many students form unexamined negative opinions during their field experiences. Our challenge was to find ways to lead students to focus more on their learners' needs and to elicit deeper reflections on how they might take responsibility for all their learners' growth.

Some educators report success in using highly structured protocols, modules, interviews, or self-assessment guides to facilitate productive reflection in preservice and inservice teachers (Black *et al.*, 2000; Bouas & Thompson, 2000; Hole & McEntee, 1999). We opted for the middle ground. Beginning in the Spring 2001 ED 75, we provided students with a list of nine reflective prompts (see Appendix) adapted from questions designed for beginning teacher conferencing through the TxBESS mentoring program (SBEC, 1999). They were to respond in writing to the first prompt after their first week of teaching, to the second prompt after their second week in the classroom, and so forth. At the end of the semester, we solicited feedback about the usefulness of the reflection journal. While 88% rated them as very helpful, a few suggested that we let students choose which prompt to respond to each week rather than assigning them in order. We implemented that suggestion in the Fall 2001 ED 75. Students still had to respond to all nine prompts before the end of their teaching experience, but, except for the first and last prompt, they could choose which they wanted to address in each weekly journal. After reviewing Fall 2001 journals, we saw no difference in the quality of students' responses. We decided that the prompts are in fact developmentally arranged, so should be responded to in their original order. We also believed that our assessment of journals would be more consistent if all students responded to the same prompt each week. In Spring and Fall 2002, all ED 75 students responded to the journal prompts in the order listed in the Appendix.

DISCUSSION OF STUDENTS' RESPONSES TO THE PROMPTS

This discussion is not a detailed, quantified analysis of ED 75 student journals from Spring 2001 through Fall 2002, but rather a characterization of the kinds of responses the prompts elicited. Nor do we make direct comparisons to earlier "free-form" student journals, which were no longer available when this project was conceived. However, because we have taught this course for a number of years, we can discern clear differences between ED 75 journals before Spring 2001 and those we have received after introducing the prompts.

At the end of their first week in the classroom, students respond to Prompt A, "Describe your initial impressions of the classroom. What challenges and opportunities do you see for yourself as a teacher? How do you expect to meet these?" Not surprisingly, responses have varied because ED 75 students are placed in a variety of k-12 classrooms. In general, students have tended to describe the learners and their personalities, the appearance of the room, the classroom routines they have observed, and the teacher's style. Negative comments usually have been limited and tentative, such as, "To me, it seems there is a lack of organization." Anticipating possible challenges, many students mentioned the diversity of learners abilities, finding ways to make curriculum relevant, and having the opportunity to teach class with some degree of autonomy. Several students believed their cooperating teachers would be a good resource in addressing their perceived challenges.

By the second week of the field experience, students are expected to be actively engaged with learners. Prompt B steers our student's attention toward the learners by asking how the student has become familiar with the learners' abilities, interests and cultural backgrounds. Some students commented that they have become familiar with their learners by interacting with the class, working one on one with learners, observing learners, and asking about their interests. Since they had only completed two weeks in the classroom at this point, many said they are still planning to do these things in order to know more about their learners' abilities and interests. The majority of the students were not sure how they

might become familiar with the different cultural backgrounds represented in their classroom. They either did not address this portion of the prompt, or admitted that they were not aware of the cultural background of the students with whom they had begun to work. A few cited the cooperating teacher as a source of information about the learners' cultural backgrounds.

Prompt C focuses students' attention on learner-centered assessment, asking how they will assess learning and how they might modify their teaching for varying readiness levels and learning styles. At this stage, many preservice teachers are concerned primarily about creating and implementing creative, engaging lessons, certainly a worthy goal. However, it is important that we encourage them to begin thinking carefully about the *effects* of their teaching on the learners, and the fact that one instructional size does not fit all. The majority of the students reported that they walked around the room and observed in order to assess learning. Others said that they checked for understanding and provided individual instruction to determine if learners have achieved the learning objectives. Still others cited group discussions as a means of assessment. Numerous strategies were identified for accommodating different learning styles including the use of dry erase boards, visual aids, hands-on activities, demonstrations, manipulatives, and providing opportunities to move in the classroom. Several students said they used worksheets to assess how well each learner had mastered the content. Others reported they used flexible grouping and a variety of instructional modes to accommodate differences in learning styles.

Prompt D keeps students attention focused on their learners by asking how they will encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning, a challenging idea for most novice teachers. This prompt also asks students what resources are available for learners who need assistance. Several students said that they asked questions rather than merely provide an answer when learners asked for help. A number of others said they would not help the learners until they have tried a new skill or concept on their own. Many reported that they found it helpful to circulate through the class in order to monitor the learners.

Other strategies mentioned for helping learners take responsibility included limiting the number of questions a learner could ask during a lesson and having students ask a classmate if they had a question.

Resources for learners needing assistance included the ED 75 student, books, instructional technology, the cooperating teacher, special teachers, manipulatives, and after-school help. Interestingly, a few students responded to this portion of Prompt D by citing the importance of making the content relevant to the learners and connecting it to previous learning.

Prompt E asks students to analyze a lesson they have taught by identifying strategies that were effective for all learners. It also asks what the student would modify if given the opportunity to reteach the lesson. Again, the prompt is designed to draw students' attention to the effect of their instruction on each learner. In addition, it invites students to learn from their own experience by analyzing their teaching so that they may improve it. Again, responses to this prompt have varied considerably. Many students said they had found the use of whole-class discussion and of small group strategies to be particularly effective. A number of others cited the importance of instructional variety within the lesson, constant monitoring of learners, the use of learning centers, making sure the learners understood the relevance of the task, and the use of clear examples. Others reported the effectiveness of hands-on activities, asking students to make predictions, and providing multiple opportunities for all students to respond.

Among the ways students said they would revise their lesson were: providing more details; considering *all* learners; checking to see if learners understood the concept or task; explaining procedures more clearly; using more visual cues and making sure all learners could see them; using more group work and hands-on activities; repeating key ideas. One student used a game that looked promising in the book, but found it did not work well for his learners. A student who used a Venn diagram in her lesson realized that she had assumed too much about her learners' readiness.

Prompt F requires students to analyze another lesson, this time focusing on learner activities, materials, resources and technology. Again, students must assess the effectiveness of this lesson along with possible revisions they would make if they taught it again. Group work was often mentioned as an effective strategy for engaging all learners because it allows students to teach one another, satisfying social needs, and to move about in the classroom, meeting kinesthetic needs. A number of students cited the Internet as an important resource for planning lessons. Others attributed the success of their lesson to the fact that it addressed all learning modalities, including hands-on activities. A few students who were able to take their learners to the school's computer lab said that that was a highly effective learning resource, while others reported success in using the Internet through the classroom TV monitor. A few students successfully used team learning strategies, while one had learners create new games using old physical education equipment.

Students proposed fewer changes in their lessons than they did for Prompt E. Among those mentioned were providing clearer directions and allocating more time for the assigned task. Several students said their lesson would have been better if some learners had not been pulled from the classroom for special services. Unfortunately, that is not something that teachers can control.

Prompt G asks students to identify particularly successful strategies they used and to speculate on why they were successful. It also asks students how they plan to build on this success. The majority of students again cited group work as a successful strategy. Demonstrations were often mentioned as an effective method. Other strategies cited included indirect teaching; inductive lessons; learning logs; reciprocal teaching; learner choice of activities; guided practice; appropriate pacing; calling on learners by name; involving the learners physically in the lesson; building on previously mastered concepts; using games to teach a concept; employing proximity; building on what the learners know and what they want to know (KWL); the use of individual white boards; "staying with [the learners] until they succeed."

Students believed these strategies had been effective because they actively engaged all learners and met their varied needs. Most said they planned to build on their success by adapting and refining the strategies for their future teaching. Several mentioned the importance of documenting their successes, saying they would refer to their ED 75 lesson plans in the future. (ED 75 students are required to turn in weekly lesson plans that follow a prescribed format. They must include all lesson plans in their ED 75 portfolio.)

Prompt H asks the students what they have learned about effective teaching practices, how they know they are effective, and how they expect to become more effective in their own teaching. Students identified numerous effective teaching practices including using leaner generated questions; maintaining an open and safe learning environment; helping learners make connections; communicating high expectations; building on learners' success; employing instructional variety; using hands-on learning; giving timely feedback; allowing ample wait time after questions; and closely monitoring learners' work. Having a good classroom management plan, appropriate use of group work, and giving clear and focused instructions were frequently identified as important components of effective teaching. Students said that they knew these strategies were effective because their learners were successful in mastering the content. Many students identified engaged learners as a critical indicator of effective teaching practices. Students said they plan to learn more about effective teaching strategies by observing other teachers, asking education professors, reading, gaining more experience, seeking learners' feedback, evaluating themselves, and attending professional conferences and workshops.

Prompt I pushes ED 75 students to reflect on their entire field experience. It asks what was their greatest success, and what decisions led to that success. It also asks them to describe their greatest challenge, and how they dealt with it. Many wrote that helping their learners' improve academically and empowering learners to believe that they were capable were their greatest success, while others mentioned acquiring a better understanding of the teacher's role, reaffirming their desire to teach, developing good rapport with the learners,

and being acknowledged as "the teacher." A few noted their success in managing the classroom, but the challenge most often identified was classroom management and the need to be more assertive. Others found challenges in developing interesting lessons, using adequate instructional variety, being consistent, meeting the needs of diverse learners, and, as one student noted, simply "accepting the responsibility of being a teacher."

IMPLICATIONS

Requiring ED 75 students to respond to prompts rather than submit unstructured weekly journals has had an observable, positive impact on the quality of their reflections. The "blow by blow" accounts of weekly occurrences are no longer the norm. Complaints about the cooperating teacher, the required curriculum, lack of resources, troublesome students, and school policies have declined markedly. From Spring 2001 on, ED 75 students have been more likely to analyze classroom experiences in their journals within the framework of the reflective questions rather than from an idiosyncratic point of view. Guided reflection on their classroom experience has helped stimulate and refine their thinking about instructional issues. In short, to a greater extent than earlier ED 75 students, they seem to be learning not simply from doing, but through thinking carefully about what they have done.

At the end of each semester, ED 75 students have the opportunity to debrief on the use of the reflective questions. A majority has rated the reflective prompts as "very helpful," and all find them to be at least "helpful." According to one student, "They allow you to look back at what you've done, how you've grown, and see what you have yet to do. In a way, you can see weaknesses such as whether or not you are using effective strategies for [learner] achievement." Students' written responses on course evaluations and oral comments in the debriefing conversations suggest that they understand the importance of reflection in their professional growth. They also understand that their – and our -- ultimate responsibility is to the K-12 learners. As one student put it, the leaner-centered emphasis of

the prompts pushes ED 75 students to contemplate "what is the kids' perspective on the subject matter, and how can the lesson be better tailored to meet their needs?" Commenting on prompt G, one student observed, "I thought about the students' success on a daily basis, analyzing what I need to do differently next time." This student's insightful remark exemplifies Schon's (1987) use of the term "reflective practitioner."

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe that the reflective questions we provided as prompts had a direct impact on the depth and quality of students' reflections in their weekly journal entries. The prompts encouraged students to reflect on specific issues that they may not have addressed on their own. Compared to previous semesters' ED 75 journals, those from Spring 2001 and after were neither rambling nor unacceptably terse. They did not focus on complaints about the required curriculum, philosophical differences with the cooperating teacher, and the behavior of individual learners, common themes in pre-2001 ED 75 journals. The prompts required students to reflect on the role of the teacher and the role of the learner, to think deeply about effective teaching practices, and to take responsibility for their learners' progress.

We believe that by engaging our preservice teachers in reflection about their teaching experiences, we are helping them learn to be reflective practitioners. Ideally, they will make this process a part of their professional repertoire as they grow both in skill and in theoretical understanding. As Anderson (1997) has said, "Skills are necessary but they are not sufficient for excellence in teaching. Teachers are incomplete if they do not know when to use which skills, if they are unable to shift from one skill to the next as the need arises, or if they possess neither the ability to understand nor to explain why one skill works sometimes and for some students, but not for all times nor for all students" (p. 207).

Our department conducts periodic follow-up surveys of our graduates and their principals. Future follow-ups may be able to tell us how successful we were in accomplishing our goal. In the meantime, we will continue to use these prompts in ED 75,

to monitor the quality of student responses, and to seek feedback from students about the effectiveness of the prompts.

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APPENDIX

Reflection Questions for EDUCATION 75

***Prompt A**-Describe your initial impressions of the classroom. What challenges and opportunities do you see for yourself as a teacher? How do you expect to meet these?*

***Prompt B**-How have you become familiar with what your students already know and are able to do? How have you become familiar with your students' individual interests and cultural backgrounds?*

***Prompt C**-How do you plan to assess how well the students have achieved the learning objectives? How will you accommodate different instructional levels and learning styles of students in your class?*

***Prompt D**- How have you encouraged students to take responsibility for their own learning? What resources are available for students needing assistance?*

***Prompt E**-Analyze a lesson you have taught. In terms of instructional strategies, were the strategies effective for all students? Why or why not? What would you do differently to improve the lesson?*

***Prompt F**-Analyze another lesson you have taught in terms of student activities, materials, resources and technology. Were these aspects of instructional delivery effective for all students? Why or why not? What would you do differently to improve the lesson?*

***Prompt G**-What strategies have been particularly successful? Why do you think this is so? How can you build on this success?*

***Prompt H**-What have you learned about effective teaching practices? How do you know if you have been effective? What can you do to become more effective?*

***Prompt I**-As a teacher with this group of students, what has been your greatest success? What were the decisions you made that attributed to that success? Think back over the course of the teaching experience and identify your greatest challenge with this group of students. How have you addressed this challenge?*

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